

**TITLE: Prosecution of the Perpetrators of Child Abuse Cases: Examination of Focal Concerns Principles****AUTHORS: Kerry McDonough****FACULTY SPONSOR: Dr. Mary Finn, Criminal Justice Professor, Department of Criminal Justice**

**Motivation:** A common public misconception is that the perpetrators of child abuse are strangers to the child. However, the majority of the time child abuse is committed by someone known by the child. Generally speaking, crimes perpetrated by strangers are regarded by the public and the justice system as more harmful. Little research to date has examined the influence of relationship status on the prosecutorial charging and court disposition in child abuse cases. Guided by the focal concerns perspective<sup>i</sup> that posits that offender blameworthiness/culpability, desire to protect community (i.e., deter offender), and practical constraints (e.g., loss of financial support/caretaker for children) influence the decisions of judges, the purpose of this research is to examine if those same principles guide prosecutorial charging decisions in child abuse cases.

**Methods:** A review of the literature that examines the influence of the principles underlying the focal concerns framework on prosecutorial and judicial processing of child abuse cases will be conducted. De-identified data will be provided from the Fulton County Prosecutor's Office on all child abuse cases from 2011 to 2012. Data will be analyzed using SPSS. A series of multinomial logistic regression models will be run to evaluate the adequacy of focal concerns framework for explaining prosecutorial decisions.

**Importance:** The importance of this research is to understand if prosecutors' assessment of the principles underlying focal concerns influences their charging decisions in child abuse cases. It is necessary to identify if child abuse cases in which the child is abused by a stranger are viewed as more harmful and result in a greater number and more serious charges than child abuse cases wherein the child is abused by someone they know.

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<sup>i</sup> Albonetti, C. (1987). Prosecutorial discretion: The effects of uncertainty. *Law & Society Review*, 21, 291-313.

<sup>i</sup> Steffensmeier, D., Ulmer, J., & Kramer, J. (1998). The interactions of race, gender, and age in criminal sentencing: The punishment cost of being young, Black, and male. *Criminology*, 36, 763-798.